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Allegiances

ThunderClan

Leader :

Bluestar - blue-grey she-cat, tinged with silver around her muzzle.

Deputy:

Redtail - small tortoiseshell tom with a distinctive ginger tail

Apprentice, Dustpaw

Medicine Cat:

Spottedleaf - beautiful dark tortoiseshell she-cat with a distinctive dappled coat

Warriors:

Lionheart - magnificent golden tabby tom with thick fur like a lion's mane

Apprentice, Greypaw

Tigerclaw - big dark brown tabby tom with unusually long front claws

Apprentice, Ravenpaw

Whitestorm - big white tom

Apprentice, Sandpaw

Darkstripe - sleek black-and-grey tabby tom

Longtail - pale tabby tom with dark black stripes

Runningwind - swift tabby tom

Willowpelt - very pale grey she-cat with unusual blue eyes

Mousefur - small dusky brown she-cat

Apprentices:

Dustpaw - dark brown tabby tom

Greypaw - long-haired solid grey tom

Ravenpaw - small, skinny black tom with a tiny white dash on his chest, and white-tipped tail

Sandpaw - pale ginger she-cat

Firepaw - handsome ginger tom

Strikepaw - beautiful calico she-cat

Queens:

Frostfur - beautiful white coat and blue eyes

Brindleface - pretty tabby

Goldenflower - pale ginger coat

Speckletail - pale tabby, and the oldest nursery queen

Elders:

Halftail - big dark brown tabby tom with part of his tail missing

Smallear - grey tom with very small ears. The oldest tom in ThunderClan

Patchpelt - small black-and-white tom

One-eye - pale grey she-cat, the oldest cat in ThunderClan. Virtually blind and deaf

Dappletail - once-pretty tortiseshell she-cat with a lovely dappled coat

Rosetail - grey tabby she-cat with a bushy, pinkish-orange tail

Prologue

A half-moon glowed on smooth granite boulders, turning them silver. The silence was broken only by the ripple of water from the swift black river and the whisper of trees in the forest beyond.

There was a stirring in the shadows, and from all around lithe dark shapes crept stealthily over the rocks. Unsheathed claws glinted in the moonlight. Wary eyes flashed like amber. And then, as if on a silent signal, the creatures leaped at each other, and suddenly the rocks were alive with wrestling, screeching cats.

At the center of the frenzy of fur and claws, a massive dark tabby pinned a bracken-coloured tom to the ground and drew up his head triumphantly. "Oakheart!" the tabby growled. "How dare you hunt in our territory? The Sunningrocks belong to ThunderClan!"

After tonight, Tigerclaw, this will be just another RiverClan hunting ground!" the bracken-colored tom spat back.

A warning yowl came from the shore, shrill and anxious. "Look out! More RiverClan warriors are coming!"

Tigerclaw turned to see sleek wet bodies sliding out of the water below the rocks. The drenched RiverClan warriors bounded silently up the shore and hurled themselves into battle without even stopping to shake the water from their fur.

The dark tabby glared down at Oakheart. "You may swim like otters, but you and your warriors do not belong in this forest!" He drew back his lips and showed his teeth as the cat struggled beneath him.

The desperate scream of a ThunderClan she-cat rose above the

clamor. A wiry RiverClan tom had pinned the brown warrior flat on her belly. Now he lunged toward her neck with jaws still dripping from his swim across the river.

Tigerclaw heard the cry and let go of Oakheart. With a mighty leap, he knocked the enemy warrior away from the she-cat. "Quick, Mousefur, run!" he ordered, before turning on the RiverClan tom who had threatened her. Mousefur scrambled to her paws, wincing from a deep gash on her shoulder, and raced away.

Behind her, Tigerclaw spat with rage as the RiverClan tom sliced open his nose. Blood blinded him for an instant, but he lunged forward regardless and sank his teeth into the hind leg of his enemy. The RiverClan cat squealed and struggled free.

"Tigerclaw!" The yowl came from a warrior with a tail as red as fox fur. "This is useless! There are too many RiverClan warriors!"

"No, Redtail. ThunderClan will never be beaten!" Tigerclaw yowled back, leaping to Redtail's side. "This is our territory!" Blood was welling around his broad black muzzle, and he shook his head impatiently, scattering scarlet drops onto the rocks.

"ThunderClan will honor your courage, Tigerclaw, but we cannot afford to lose any more of our warriors," Redtail urged. "Bluestar would never expect her warriors to fight against these impossible odds. We will have another chance to avenge this defeat." He met Tigerclaw's amber-eyed gaze steadily, then reared away and sprang onto a boulder at the edge of the trees.

"Retreat, ThunderClan! Retreat!" he yowled. At once his warriors squirmed and struggled away from their opponents. Spitting and snarling, they backed toward Redtail. For a heartbeat, the RiverClan cats looked confused. Was this battle so easily won? Then Oakheart yowled a jubilant cry. As soon as they heard him, the RiverClan warriors raised their voices and joined their deputy in caterwauling their victory.

Redtail looked down at his warriors. With a flick of his tail, he gave the signal and the ThunderClan cats dived down the far side of the Sunningrocks, then disappeared into the trees.

Tigerclaw followed last. He hesitated at the edge of the forest and glanced back at the bloodstained battlefield. His face was grim, his eyes furious slits. Then he leaped after his Clan into the silent forest.

In a deserted clearing, an old grey she-cat sat alone, staring up at the clear night sky. All around her in the shadows she could hear the breathing and stirrings of sleeping cats.

A small tortoiseshell she-cat emerged from a dark corner, her pawsteps quick and soundless.

The grey cat dipped her head in greeting. "How is Mousefur?" she meowed.

"Her wounds are deep, Bluestar," answered the tortoiseshell, settling herself on the night-cool grass. "But she is young and strong; she will heal quickly."

"And the others?"

"They will all recover, too."

Bluestar sighed. "We are lucky not to have lost any of our warriors this time. You are a gifted medicine cat, Spottedleaf." She tilted her head again and studied the stars. "I am deeply troubled by tonight's defeat. ThunderClan has not been beaten in its own territory since I became leader," she murmured. "These are difficult times for our Clan. The season of newleaf is late, and there have been fewer kits. ThunderClan needs more warriors if it is to survive."

"But the year is only just beginning," Spottedleaf pointed out calmly. "There will be more kits when greenleaf comes."

The grey cat twitched her broad shoulders. "Perhaps. But training our young to become warriors takes time. If ThunderClan is to defend its territory, it must have new warriors as soon as possible."

"Are you asking StarClan for answers?" meowed Spottedleaf gently, following Bluestar's gaze and staring up at the swath of stars glittering in the dark sky.

"It is at times like this we need the words of ancient warriors to help us. Has StarClan spoken to you?" Bluestar asked.

"Not for some moons, Bluestar."

Suddenly a shooting star blazed over the treetops. Spottedleaf's tail twitched and the fur along her spine bristled.

Bluestar's ears pricked but she remained silent as Spottedleaf continued to gaze upward.

After a few moments, Spottedleaf lowered her head and turned to Bluestar. "It was a message from StarClan," she murmured. A distant look came into her eyes. "Fire alone can save our Clan."

"Fire?" Bluestar echoed. "But fire is feared by all the Clans! How can it save us?"

Spottedleaf shook her head. "I do not know," she admitted. "But this is the message StarClan has chosen to share with me."

The ThunderClan leader fixed her clear blue eyes on the medicine cat. "You have never been wrong before, Spottedleaf," she meowed. "If StarClan has spoken, then it must be so. Fire will save our Clan."

This is the exact same prologue as the original Into The Wild, but I hope you liked it anyways. Thanks for the views, by the way! =D

Chapter 1

"Pssst! Hey, Frost! WAKE UP!" Frost heard her brother, Smudge, who was around two moons younger than her, shake her awake.

"What is it, Smudge?" Frost asked him with an irritated flick of her tail.

"Rusty entered the woods!" Smudge said excitedly.

"So?" She asked.

"So I want to aske him what happened there! " Smudge said excitedly. "Fine, I'll come with you..." Frost said as she stood up and stretched. Then Smudge and Frost went to the garden and jumped onto the fence.

An hour later, Rusty came to his garden. " Hello, Rusty! You should have been awake an hour ago. The baby sparrows were out stretching their wings" Smudge said.

"Did you catch any?" Rusty asked.

Smudge yawned and licked his nose. " Couldn't be bothered. I'd already eaten enough at home. Anyway, why weren't you out earlier? Yesterday you were complaining about Henry sleeping his time away, and today you're not much better yourself."

Rusty sat down on the cool earth beside the fence and curled his tail neatly over his front paws. "I was in the woods last night," he reminded Smudge.

"So, Rusty, how was it? Did you catch anything? Or did anything catch you?" Frost asked.

Rusty paused, " I met some wild cats" he began.

"What!" Smudge was clearly shocked. "Did you get into a fight?" Frost asked excitedly.

"Sort of." Rusty said.

"Were you hurt? What happened?" Smudge prompted him eagerly.

"There were three of them. Bigger and stronger than any of us."

"And you fought all three of them!" Frost interrupted, her tail twitching with excitement.

"No!" Rusty mewed hastily. "Just the youngest one; the other two came later."

"How come they didn't shred you to pieces?" Frost asked.

"They just warned me to leave their territory. But then..." Rusty hesitated.

"What!" mewed Smudge impatiently.

"They asked me to join their Clan."

Smudge and Frost's whiskers quivered disbelievingly.

"They did!" Rusty insisted.

"Why would they do that?" Frost asked.

I don't know," Rusty admitted. "I think they need extra paws in their Clan."

Sounds a bit odd to me," Smudge mewed doubtfully. "I wouldn't trust them if I were you."

"But I do trust them," Rusty purred softly. "And I've made up my mind. I'm going to join them."

Smudge scrambled down from the fence and stood in front of Rusty. "Please don't go, Rusty," he mewed in alarm. "I might never see you again."

Rusty nudged him affectionately with his head. "Don't worry. My housefolk will get another cat. You'll get on with him fine. You get along with everyone!"

"But it won't be the same!" Smudge wailed.

"But it won't be the same!" Smudge wailed.

Rusty twitched his tail impatiently. "That's just the point. If I stay around here till they take me to the Cutter, I won't be the same either."

Smudge looked puzzled. "The Cutter?" he echoed.

"The vet," Rusty explained. "To be altered, like Henry was."

Smudge shrugged and stared down at his paws. "But Henry's all right," he mumbled. "I mean, I know he's a bit lazier now, but he's not unhappy. We could still have fun."

"I'm sorry, Smudge. I'll miss you, but I have to go."

Smudge didn't reply, but stepped forward and gently touched Rusty's nose with his own. "Fair enough. I can see I can't stop you, but at least let's spend one more morning together."

Frost didn't say anything, but accompanied Smudge and Rusty when Rusty shared words with the cats he had grown up with.

As Rusty jumped down his garden fence for the last time, Frost jumped down beside him and said, " Wait!"

"What is it, Frost?" Rusty asked impatiently while Smudge looked at her confusedly.

"I want to join the Clans, too" She said.

"Really?!" Rusty and Smudge exclaimed and she nodded.

"I want to see what it's like to be part of a Clan. Sorry Smudge, I'll have to leave you" She said, looking at her brother sadly.

"But I- " Smudge started but cut himself off with a sigh.

"I'll miss you, Frost" He said, touching his nose gently to Frost's own.

"I'll miss you too, Smudge" Frost said.

She then followed Rusty to a place where tall trees shielded the ground from the midday sunshine, making it comfortably cool. Here and there a patch of sunlight shone through a gap in the leaves and lit up the forest floor.

Frost saw Rusty sniffing the air uncertainly but decided to wait and watch what would happen next.

"You have a lot to learn, " meowed a deep voice. "Even the tiniest Clan kit knows when another cat is nearby."

Frost saw a pair of green eyes glinting from beneath a bramble bush. A golden tabby emerged from the bushes, eyeing Frost. "Who's this?" He asked.

"This is Frost, she's my friend's sister and she wanted to be a Clan cat too" Rusty told the tom.

"It is nice meeting you, Frost. I am Lionheart. Can you both tell if I'm alone?" asked the golden tabby.

Frost saw Rusty sniff again. She copied his action and could make out some cat scents.

"Bluestar and Greypaw aren't with you this time." Rusty said.

That's right," meowed Lionheart. "But someone else is."

Rusty and Frost stiffened as a second Clan cat strode into the clearing.

"This is Whitestorm," purred Lionheart. "One of ThunderClan's senior warriors."

Frost looked at the tom and felt her spine tingle with cold fear. Was

this a trap? Long-bodied and muscular, Whitestorm stood in front of Rusty and Frost and gazed down at them. His white coat was thick and unmarked and his eyes were the yellow of sunbaked sand. Frost saw Rusty flatten his ears warily, and tense his muscles in preparation for a fight.

Relax, before your fear-scent brings unwanted attention," growled Lionheart. "We are here only to take you to our camp."

Rusty and Frost sat very still, hardly daring to breathe, as Whitestorm stretched his nose forward and gave them a curious sniff.

"Hello, young ones," murmured the white cat. "I've heard a lot about you." He said as he looked at Rusty.

Rusty dipped his head in greeting. Frost copied him again.

"Come, we can speak more once we are in the camp," ordered Lionheart, and, without pausing, he and Whitestorm leaped away into the undergrowth. Rusty and Frost jumped to their paws and followed as quickly as they could.

The two warriors made no allowances for Rusty and Frost as they sped through the forest, and before long Rusty was struggling to keep up. Frost, however, was able to keep up with them. Their pace barely slowed as they led them over fallen trees that they cleared in a single leap, but which Rusty and Frost had to scramble over paw by paw. They passed through sharply fragrant pine trees, where they had to jump across deep gullies churned up by a Twoleg tree-eater. From the safety of her garden fence, Frost had often heard it roaring and snarling in the distance. One gully was too wide to jump, half-filled with slimy, foul-smelling water. The Clan cats waded through without hesitating.

Frost had never put a paw in water before. But she was determined not to show any signs of weakness, so she narrowed her eyes and followed, trying to ignore the uncomfortable wetness that soaked her belly fur.

At last Lionheart and Whitestorm paused. Frost skidded to a halt

behind them with Rusty arriving there a little later and stood panting while the two warriors stepped onto a rock that rested on the edge of a small ravine.

"We are very close to our camp now," meowed Lionheart.

Frost strained to see any signs of life—moving leaves, a glimpse of fur among the bushes below, but her eyes saw nothing except the same undergrowth that covered the rest of the forest floor.

"Use your nose. You must be able to scent it," hissed Whitestorm impatiently.

Frost closed her eyes and sniffed. Whitestorm was right. The scents here were very different from the cat-scent she was used to. The air smelled stronger, speaking of many, many different cats.

She nodded thoughtfully and announced, "I can smell cats."

Lionheart and Whitestorm exchanged amused looks.

"There will come a time, if you are accepted into the Clan, when you will know each cat-scent by name," Lionheart meowed. "Follow me!" He led the way nimbly down the boulders to the bottom of the ravine, and pushed his way through a thick patch of gorse. Frost and Rusty followed, and Whitestorm took up the rear. As her sides scraped against the prickly gorse, Frost looked down and noticed that the grass beneath her paws was flattened into a broad, strong-smelling track. This must be the main entrance into the camp, she thought.

Beyond the gorse, a clearing opened up. The ground at the center was bare, hard earth, shaped by many generations of pawsteps. This camp had been here a long time. The clearing was dappled by sunshine, and the air felt warm and still.

Frost looked around, her eyes wide. There were cats everywhere, sitting alone or in groups, sharing food or purring quietly as they groomed one another.

"Just after sunhigh, when the day is hottest, is a time for sharing tongues," Lionheart explained.

"Sharing tongues?" Rusty echoed.

"Clan cats always spend time grooming each other and sharing the news of the day," Whitestorm told him. "We call it sharing tongues. It is a custom that binds the members of the Clan together."

The cats had obviously smelled Frost and Rusty's foreign scent, for heads began to turn and stare curiously in their direction.

Suddenly shy of meeting any cat's gaze directly, Frost looked around the clearing. It was edged with thick grass, dotted with tree stumps and a fallen tree. A thick curtain of ferns and gorse shielded the camp from the rest of the woods.

"Over there," meowed Lionheart, flicking his tail toward an impenetrable-looking tangle of brambles, "is the nursery, where the kits are cared for."

Frost swivelled her ears toward the bushes. She couldn't see through the knot of prickly branches, but she could hear the mewling of several kittens from somewhere inside. As she watched, a ginger she-cat squirmed out through a small gap in the front. That must be one of the queens, Frost thought.

A tabby queen with distinctive black markings appeared around the bramble bush. The two she-cats exchanged a friendly lick between the ears before the tabby slipped inside the nursery, murmuring to the squealing kits.

"The care of our kits is shared by all of the queens," meowed Lionheart. "All cats serve the Clan. Loyalty to the Clan is the first law in our warrior code, a lesson you must learn quickly if you wish to stay with us."

"Here comes Bluestar," meowed Whitestorm, sniffing the air.

Frost sniffed the air too, and smelled the scent of a she-cat, who appeared a moment later from the shadow of a large boulder that lay beside them at the head of the clearing.

"He came," Bluestar purred, addressing the warriors. "And he has brought another kittypet along."

Whitestorm replied, "Lionheart was convinced he would not. He said the other one wanted to be a Clan cat, too"

Frost noticed the tip of Bluestar's tail twitch impatiently. "Well, what do you think of them?" she asked.

"They kept up well on the return journey, despite their puny sizes," Whitestorm admitted. "They certainly seem strong for kittypets."

"So it is agreed?" Bluestar looked at Lionheart and Whitestorm.

Both cats nodded.

"Then I shall announce their arrival to the Clan." Bluestar leaped up onto the boulder and yowled, "Let all those cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting."

Her clear call brought all the cats trotting toward her, emerging like liquid shadows from the edges of the clearing. Frost and Rusty stayed where they were, flanked by Lionheart and Whitestorm. The other cats settled themselves below the Highrock and looked expectantly up at their leader.

Frost saw Rusty looking relieved suddenly and followed his gaze to see an apprentice with thick grey fur among the cats. Beside him sat a young tortoiseshell queen, her black-tipped tail tucked neatly over small white paws. A large dark grey tabby crouched behind them, the black stripes on his fur looking like shadows on a moonlit forest floor.

When the cats were still, Bluestar spoke. "ThunderClan needs more warriors," she began. "Never before have we had so few apprentices in training. It has been decided that ThunderClan will take in outsiders to train as warriors...."

Frost heard indignant mutterings erupt among the Clan cats, but Bluestar silenced them with a firm yowl. "I have found two cats who are willing to become apprentices of ThunderClan."

"Lucky to become an apprentice," caterwauled a loud voice above the ripple of shock that spread through the cats.

Frost craned her neck and saw a pale tabby cat standing up and glaring defiantly at the leader.

Bluestar ignored the tabby and addressed all of her Clan. "Lionheart and Whitestorm have met these young cats, and they agree with me that we should train them with the other apprentices."

Frost looked up at Lionheart, then back at the Clan, to find all eyes were on her now. She held their gazes and looked at them defiantly. There was silence for a moment.

Now a deafening crescendo of caterwauling rose from the crowd.

"Where do they come from?"

"Which Clan do they belong to?"

"What a strange scent they carry! That's not the scent of any Clan I know!"

Then one yowl in particular sounded out above the rest. "Look at their collars! They're kittypets!" It was the pale tabby again. "Once a kittypet, always a kittypet. This Clan needs wildborn warriors to defend it, not another soft mouth to feed."

Lionheart bent down and hissed into Frost and Rusty's ears, "That tabby is Longtail. He smells your fear. They all do. You must prove to him and the other cats that your fear won't hold you back."

The tabby continued to jeer at them. "Your collar is a mark of the Twolegs, and that noisy jingling will make you a poor hunter at best. At worst, it will bring the Twolegs into our territory, looking for the poor lost kittypets who fill the woods with their pitiful tinkling."

All the cats howled in agreement.

Longtail went on, well aware that he had the support of his audience. "The noise of your treacherous bell will alert our enemies, even if your Twoleg stench doesn't!"

Lionheart hissed into Frost and Rusty's ears once more: "Do you

back down from a challenge?"

Frost still did not move. But this time she was trying to pinpoint Longtail's position. There he was, just behind a dusky brown queen. Frost flattened her ears, narrowed her eyes and, hissing, leaped through the startled cats to fling herself onto her tormentor, with Rusty close behind her.

*>>**After the fight with Longtail**>>*

At once, Bluestar leaped down from the Highrock and silenced the noisy crowd with a thunderous caterwaul. Frost, Rusty and Longtail remained fixed to the spot, gasping for breath. Clumps of fur hung from their ruffled coats. Frost could feel a cut stinging above her eye. Longtail's left ear was badly torn, and blood dripped down his lean shoulders onto the dusty ground. They stared at each other, their hostility not yet spent.

Bluestar stepped forward and took the collars from Longtail. She placed them on the ground in front of her and meowed, "The newcomers have lost their Twoleg collars in a battle for their honor. StarClan has spoken its approval—these cats have been released from the hold of their Twoleg owners, and are free to join ThunderClan as apprentices."

Frost and Rusty looked at Bluestar and solemnly nodded their acceptance. They stood up and stepped forward into a shaft of sunshine, welcoming the warmth on their sore muscles. The pool of light blazed bright on Rusty's orange pelt, making his fur glow. Frost and Rusty lifted their heads proudly and looked at the cats that surrounded them. This time no cat argued or jeered. They had shown themselves to be worthy opponents in battle.

Bluestar approached Frost and Rusty and placed the shredded collars on the ground in front of them. She touched Rusty's ear gently with her nose. "You look like a brand of fire in this sunlight," Frost heard her murmur. Her eyes flashed briefly, as if her words had more meaning for her than Frost and Rusty knew. "You have fought well." Then she turned to the Clan and announced, "From this day forward, until he has earned his warrior name, this apprentice will be called Firepaw, in honour of his flame-coloured

coat."

She then touched her nose to Frost's ear, "You have fought well, too." She said. Turning to the Clan again, she continued, "From this day forward, until she has earned her warrior name, this apprentice will be called Strikepaw, in honour of her fighting skills."

She stepped back and, with the other cats, waited silently for their next move. Without hesitating, Frost and Rusty turned and kicked dust and grass over their collars as though burying their dirt.

Longtail growled and limped out of the clearing toward a fern-shaded corner. The cats split into groups, murmuring to each other excitedly.

"Hey, Firepaw and Strikepaw!"

Frost heard a friendly voice behind her. Strikepaw! A thrill of pride surged through her at the sound of her new name. She turned to see the grey apprentice she had seen Firepaw looking at before this.

"Great fight, Firepaw!" mewed the apprentice. "Especially for a kittypet! Longtail is a warrior, although he only finished his training two moons ago. That scar you left on his ear won't let him forget you in a hurry. You've spoiled his good looks, that's for sure."

"Thanks, Greypaw," Firepaw replied. "He put up quite a fight, though!" He licked his front paw and began to wipe clean a deep scratch that stung above his eye. As Rusty washed, Frost could hear their names echoing among the meows of the cats.

"Firepaw! Strikepaw!"

"Hey, Firepaw and Strikepaw!"

"Welcome, young Firepaw and Strikepaw!"

Strikepaw closed her eyes for a moment and let the voices wash over her.

"Good name, too!" Greypaw mewed approvingly, jolting her awake.

Firepaw looked around. "Where did Longtail creep off to?"

"I think he was heading toward Spottedleaf's den." Greypaw tipped his head toward the fern-enclosed corner Longtail had disappeared into. "She's our medicine cat. Not bad-looking either. Younger and a lot prettier than most—"

A low yowl next to the three cats stopped Greypaw mid-speech. They turned, and Strikepaw recognized the powerful gray tabby cat who had sat behind Greypaw earlier.

"Darkstripe," mewed Greypaw, dipping his head respectfully.

The sleek tom looked at Strikepaw and Firepaw for a moment. "Lucky your collars snapped when it did. Longtail is a young warrior, but I can't imagine him being beaten by kittypets!" He spat the word kittypets scornfully, then turned and stalked off.

"Now Darkstripe," Greypaw hissed to Strikepaw and Firepaw under his breath, "is neither young, nor pretty...."

Strikepaw was about to agree with her new friend when she was interrupted by a warning yowl from an old grey cat sitting at the edge of the clearing.

"Smallear smells trouble!" Greypaw meowed, immediately alert.

Strikepaw barely had time to look around before a young cat crashed through the bushes and into the camp. He was skinny and —apart from the white tip of his long, thin tail—jet black from head to toe.

Greypaw gasped. "That's Ravenpaw! Why is he alone? Where's Tigerclaw?"

Strikepaw looked at Ravenpaw staggering across the floor of the clearing. He was panting heavily. His coat was ruffled and dusty, and his eyes were wild with fear.

"Who are Ravenpaw and Tigerclaw?" Firepaw whispered to Graypaw, as several other cats raced past him to greet the new arrival.

"Ravenpaw's an apprentice. Tigerclaw's his mentor," Greypaw explained quickly. "Ravenpaw went out with Tigerclaw and Redtail at sunrise on a mission against RiverClan, the lucky fur ball!"

"Redtail?" Strikepaw echoed, thoroughly confused by all these names.

"Bluestar's deputy," hissed Greypaw. "But why on earth has Ravenpaw come back alone?" he added to himself. They lifted their heads to listen as Bluestar stepped forward.

Ravenpaw?" The she-cat spoke calmly, but a look of worry clouded her blue eyes. The other cats drew back, curling their lips with anxiety.

"What has happened?" Bluestar jumped onto the Highrock and looked down at the trembling cat. "Speak, Ravenpaw!"

Ravenpaw was still struggling for breath, and his sides heaved fitfully while the dust around him turned red with blood, but still he managed to scramble up onto the Highrock and stand beside Bluestar. He turned to the crowd of eager faces that surrounded him, and summoned enough breath to declare, "Redtail is dead!"

I AM FINALLY DONE!!! The first actual chapter of my first Warriors story which I wrote and is not full copied from the book!!!! I'M SO HAPPYYYYYYYYYY! =D

3368 words!!! That's the most number of words I've ever written in any of my chapters in all of my stories so far!!!!

Chapter 2

Shocked yowls rose from the Clan cats and echoed through the forest.

Ravenpaw staggered slightly. His right foreleg glistened, wet with blood that flowed from the deep gash on his shoulder. "We m-met five RiverClan warriors beside the stream, not far from the Sunningrocks," he went on shakily. "Oakheart was among them."

"Oakheart!" Greypaw gasped beside Strikepaw. "He is the deputy of RiverClan. He's one of the greatest warriors in the forest. Lucky Ravenpaw! Wish it could have been me. I'd have really—" Greypaw was silenced by a fierce glance from the old gray tom who had first sensed Ravenpaw's return. Strikepaw turned her attention back to Ravenpaw

"Redtail warned Oakheart to keep his hunting parties out of ThunderClan territory. He said the next RiverClan warrior to be caught in ThunderClan territory would be killed, but Oak...Oakheart would not backdown. He said his Cl-Clan had to be fed, whatever we threatened." Ravenpaw paused to wheeze for breath. His wound was still bleeding heavily, and he stood awkwardly to keep the weight off his shoulder.

"That's when the RiverClan cats attacked. It was hard to see what was happening. The fighting was vicious. I saw Oakheart had Redtail pinned to the ground, but then Redtail..." Suddenly Ravenpaw's eyes rolled in his head and he lurched sideways. Half scrambling, half falling, he slithered off the Highrock and collapsed on the ground below.

A ginger queen bounded toward him and crouched at his side. She licked his cheek briefly and calledout, "Spottedleaf!"

Out of the fern-shaded corner trotted the pretty tortoiseshell Strikepaw had noticed sitting beside Greypaw earlier. She hurried over to Ravenpaw and mewed for the queen to stand back. Then she used her small pink nose to roll the apprentice over so that she could take a good look at the wound. She glanced up and meowed, "It's all right, Goldenflower, his wounds aren't fatal. But I'll need to fetch some cobwebs to stop the bleeding."

As Spottedleaf sprinted back to her den, the hushed silence in the clearing was broken by a mournful howl. All eyes turned to the direction it had come from.

A massive dark brown tabby staggered through the gorse tunnel. Between his sharp teeth the warrior held not prey, but the lifeless body of another cat. He dragged the tattered creature into the center of the clearing.

Strikepaw craned her neck and glimpsed a flash of bright ginger tail hanging limply in the dust.

Shock rippled through the Clan like a chill breeze. Beside Strikepaw, Greypaw dropped into a crouch as grief swept over him. "Redtail!"

"How did this happen, Tigerclaw?" demanded Bluestar from her position on the Highrock.

Tigerclaw let the scruff of Redtail's neck fall from his mouth. He looked steadily back at Bluestar. "He died with honor, struck down by Oakheart. I couldn't save him, but I managed to take Oakheart's life while he was still gloating over his victory." Tigerclaw's voice was strong and deep. "Redtail's death was not in vain, for I doubt we'll see RiverClan hunters in our territory again."

Strikepaw glanced at Greypaw. The apprentice's eyes were dark with sadness

After a moment's pause, several of the cats moved forward to lick Redtail's bedraggled fur. As they groomed they purred hushed phrases to the dead warrior.

Firepaw whispered into Greypaw's ear, "What are they doing?"

Greypaw didn't take his eyes off the dead cat as he replied. "His spirit may have left to join StarClan, but the Clan will share tongues with Redtail one last time."

"StarClan?" Strikepaw echoed.

"It's the tribe of heavenly warriors that watches over all Clan cats. You can see them in Silverpelt."

Strikepaw and Firepaw looked confused, so Greypaw explained. "Silverpelt is that thick band of stars you see each night stretching across the sky. Each star is a StarClan warrior. Redtail will be among them tonight."

Strikepaw and Firepaw nodded, and Greypaw stepped forward to share tongues with his dead deputy.

Bluestar had remained silent while the first cats came to pay their respects to Redtail. Now she leaped down from the Highrock and walked slowly toward Redtail's body. The other cats retreated and watched as their leader crouched down to share tongues with her old comrade one last time.

When she had finished she raised her head and spoke. Her voice was low and thick with grief, and the Clan listened in silence. "Redtail was a brave warrior. His loyalty to ThunderClan could never be doubted. I always relied on his judgment, for it bore witness to the needs of the Clan, and was never swayed by self-interest or pride. He would have made a fine leader."

Then she lowered herself onto her belly, her head bowed, her paws stretched neatly before her, and silently she grieved for her lost friend. Several other cats came and lay down beside her, their bowed heads and hunched backs echoing her mournful pose.

Strikepaw watched. She had not known Redtail, but she couldn't help feeling moved as she witnessed the Clan mourn.

Greypaw came and stood beside her again. "Dustpaw will be sad," he remarked.

"Dustpaw?"

"Redtail's apprentice. That brown-striped tabby over there. I wonder who his new mentor will be?"

Strikepaw glanced over at the small tom who squatted near Redtail's body, staring unseeing at the ground. Strikepaw looked past him to the Clan leader. "How long will Blusetar sit with him?" she asked.

"Probably the whole night," replied Graypaw. "Redtail was her deputy for many, many moons. She won't want to let him go too quickly. He was one of the best warriors. Not as big and powerful as Tigerclaw or Lionheart, but quick and clever."

Strikepaw looked at Tigerclaw, admiring the strength that swelled in his powerful muscles and broad head. His massive body showed signs of his warrior life. One of his ears was split into a deep vee shape, and a thick scar sliced the bridge of his nose.

Suddenly Tigerclaw stood up and stalked over to Ravenpaw. Spottedleaf was crouching beside Tigerclaw's wounded apprentice, using her teeth and front paws to press wads of cobweb onto his shoulder wound.

Firepaw leaned toward Graypaw and asked, "What's Spottedleaf doing?"

"Stopping the bleeding. It looked like a nasty cut. And Ravenpaw seemed really shaken up. He's always been a bit jumpy, but I've never seen him this bad before. Let's go and see if he's woken up yet."

They made their way through the grieving cats toward the spot where Ravenpaw lay and settled themselves a respectful distance away to wait until Tigerclaw had finished speaking.

"So, Spottedleaf." Tigerclaw addressed the tortoiseshell with a confident meow. "How is he? Do you think you can save him? I've spent a lot of time training him up, and I don't want my efforts to be wasted at the first battle."

Spottedleaf didn't look up from her patient as she replied. "Yes, a pity if, after all your valuable training, he dies in his first fight, eh?" Strikepaw could hear a teasing purr in her soft mew.

"Will he live?" Tigerclaw demanded.

"Of course. He just needs to rest."

Tigerclaw snorted and looked down at the motionless black shape. He jabbed Ravenpaw with one of his front claws. "Come on, then! Get up!"

Ravenpaw didn't move.

"Look at the length of that claw!" Firepaw hissed.

"Too right!" replied Greypaw with feeling. "I know *I* wouldn't want to get into a fight with him!"

"Not so fast, Tigerclaw!" Spottedleaf placed her paw over Tigerclaw's sharp talon and gently moved it away. "This apprentice needs to keep as still as possible until the cut has healed. We don't want him opening his wound by jumping about trying to please you. Leave him alone."

Strikepaw found herself holding her breath as she waited for Tigerclaw's reaction. She guessed that few cats dared to give orders to the warrior like that. The big tabby stiffened, and seemed about to speak when Spottedleaf mewed teasingly, "Even you know better than to argue with a medicine cat, Tigerclaw."

Tigerclaw's eyes flashed at the little tortoiseshell's words. "I wouldn't dare argue with you, dear Spottedleaf," he purred. He turned to leave and caught sight of Greypaw, Strikepaw and Firepaw. "Who's this?" he asked Greypaw, towering above them.

"They're the new apprentices," Graypaw mewed.

"They smell like kittypets!" snorted the warrior.

"We *were* house cats," Strikepaw meowed boldly, "but we are going to train to be warriors."

Tigerclaw looked at them with sudden interest. "Ah, yes. Now I remember. Bluestar mentioned that she had stumbled across some stray kittypet. So she's actually going to try you out, is she?"

Strikepaw sat up very straight, anxious to impress this distinguished Clan warrior. "That's right," she mewed respectfully.

Tigerclaw eyed him thoughtfully. "Then I shall watch your progress with interest."

Strikepaw puffed her chest out proudly as Tigerclaw stalked away. "Do you think he liked us?"

"I don't think Tigerclaw likes any apprentices!" whispered Greypaw.

Just then Ravenpaw stirred and twitched his ears. "Has he gone?" he mumbled.

"Who? Tigerclaw?" replied Greypaw, trotting toward him. "Yep, he's gone."

"Hi, there," Strikepaw began, about to introduce herself."Go away, the three of you!" Spottedleaf protested. "How am I meant to help this cat with all these interruptions!" She impatiently flicked her tail at Greypaw, Strikepaw and Firepaw and pushed her way between them and her patient.

Strikepaw realized she was serious, despite the lively glimmer in her warm amber eyes.

"Come on then, Firepaw and Strikepaw," mewed Graypaw. "I'll show you around. See you later, Ravenpaw."

The two cats left Spottedleaf with Ravenpaw and walked across the clearing.

Greypaw looked thoughtful. He was clearly taking his duties as a guide very seriously. "You know the Highrock already," he began, flicking his tail toward the big, smooth rock. "Bluestar always addresses the Clan from there. Her den is down there." He lifted his nose toward a hollow in the side of the Highrock. "Her den was carved out many moons ago by an ancient stream." Hanging lichen

draped the entrance, sheltering the leader's nest from wind and rain.

"The warriors sleep over here," Greypaw went on.

Firepaw and Strikepaw followed him to a large bush a few paces away from the Highrock. There was a clear view from here right down to the gorse entrance into the camp. The branches of the bush hung low, but Strikepaw could see a sheltered space inside where the warriors made their nests.

"The senior warriors sleep nearest the center, where it's warmest," explained Greypaw. "They usually share their fresh-kill together over by that clump of nettles. The younger warriors eat nearby. Sometimes they are invited to join the senior warriors for eating, which is a big honor."

"What about the other Clan cats?" Strikepaw asked, fascinated but feeling rather overwhelmed by all the traditions and rituals of Clan life.

"Well, the queens share warrior quarters when they work as warriors, but when they are expecting kits, or nursing them, they stay in a nest near the nursery. The elders have their own place on the other side of the clearing. Come on, I'll show you."

Strikepaw trotted after Greypaw, across the clearing, and past the shadowy corner where Spottedleaf had her den. They stopped beside a fallen tree that sheltered a patch of lush grass. Crouched among the soft greenery were four elderly cats tucking into a plump young rabbit.

"Dustpaw and Sandpaw would have brought them that," whispered Greypaw. "One of the apprentices' duties is catching fresh-kill for the elders."

"Hello, youngster," one of the elders greeted Greypaw.

"Hello, Smallear," mewed Greypaw, nodding respectfully.

"This must be our new apprentice. Strikepaw and Firepaw, isn't it?" meowed a second tom. His patchy fur was dark brown, and there

was only a stump where his tail should have been.

"That's right," Firepaw replied, copying Greypaw's polite nod.

"I'm Halftail," purred the brown tom. "Welcome to the Clan."

"Have you three eaten?" meowed Smallear.

Firepaw, Strikepaw and Greypaw shook their heads.

"Well, there's enough here. Dustpaw and Sandpaw are turning into fine hunters. Would you mind if these youngsters shared a mouse, One-eye?"

The pale gray queen who lay beside him shook her head. Strikepaw noticed one of her eyes was clouded and sightless.

"What about you, Dappletail?"

The other elder, a tortoiseshell she-cat with a gray muzzle, meowed in a voice cracked with age, "Of course not."

"Thank you," mewed Greypaw eagerly. He stepped forward and took a large mouse from the pile of prey, then dropped it at Strikepaw and Firepaw's feet. "You still not tasted mouse?" he asked.

"No," they admitted. Strikepaw suddenly felt excited by the warm smells that were rising from this piece of fresh-kill. Her whole body quivered at the thought of sharing his first real food as a Clan member.

"In that case, you can have first bites. Just save me some!" Greypaw dipped his head and stood back to give Strikepaw and Firepaw room. Strikepaw crouched down and took a large bite from the mouse. It was juicy and tender, and sang with the flavors of the forest.

"What do you think?" asked Greypaw.

"Fantastic!" mumbled Firepaw, his mouth still full.

"Move over then," mewed Greypaw, stepping forward and bending his head to take a bite.

As the two apprentices shared the mouse, they listened to the elders talk among themselves.

"How long before Bluestar appoints a new deputy?" asked Smallear.

"What did you say, Smallear?" mewed One-eye.

"I think your hearing has become as poor as your eyesight!" snapped Smallear impatiently. "I said, how long before Bluestar appoints a new deputy?"

One-eye ignored Smallear's irritated reply and spoke instead to the tortoiseshell queen. "Dappletail, do you remember the day many moons ago when Bluestar herself was appointed deputy?"

Dappletail mewed earnestly, "Oh, yes! It was not long after she lost her kits."

"She'll not be happy to be appointing a new deputy," Smallear observed. "Redtail served her long and well. But she'll need to make up her mind quickly. According to Clan custom, the choice has to be made before moonhigh after the death of the old deputy."

"At least this time the choice is obvious," meowed Halftail.

Strikepaw raised her head and looked around the clearing. Who could Halftail mean? To Strikepaw, all the warriors looked worthy of becoming deputy. Perhaps he meant Tigerclaw; after all, he had avenged Redtail'sdeath.

Tigerclaw was sitting not far off, his ears angled toward the elders' conversation.

As Strikepaw stretched with her tongue to lick the last traces of mouse from her whiskers, Bluestar's voice called from the Highrock. Redtail's body still lay in the clearing below, pale gray in the fading light. "A new deputy must be appointed," she meowed. "But first, let us give thanks to StarClan for the life of Redtail. Tonight he sits with his fellow warriors among the stars."

Silence fell as all the cats looked up into the sky, which was beginning to darken as evening crept over the forest.

"And now I shall name ThunderClan's new deputy," Bluestar continued. "I say these words before the body of Redtail, so that his spirit may hear and approve my choice."

Strikepaw looked at Tigerclaw. She couldn't help noticing the hunger in the big warrior's amber eyes as he stared up at the Highrock.

"Lionheart," meowed Bluestar, "will be the new deputy of ThunderClan."

Firepaw was curious to see Tigerclaw's reaction. But the dark warrior's face revealed nothing as he moved to congratulate Lionheart with a nudge so hearty that it almost pushed the golden tabby off balance.

"Why didn't she make Tigerclaw deputy?" Firepaw whispered to Greypaw.

"Probably because Lionheart has been a warrior longer, so he has a lot more experience," Greypaw murmured back, still looking up at Bluestar

Bluestar spoke again. "Redtail was also mentor to young Dustpaw. Since there must be no delay in the training of our apprentices, I shall appoint Dustpaw's new mentor immediately. Darkstripe, you are ready for your first apprentice, so you will continue Dustpaw's training. You had a fine mentor in Tigerclaw, and I expect you to pass on some of the excellent skills you were taught."

The tabby warrior swelled with pride as he showed his acceptance with a solemn nod. He strode over to Dustpaw, bent his head, and rather awkwardly touched noses with his new apprentice. Dustpaw flicked his tail respectfully, but his eyes were still dull with grief for his lost mentor.

Bluestar raised her voice. "I shall keep a vigil with Redtail's body tonight, before we bury him at sunrise." She jumped down from the

Highrock and walked over to lie beside Redtail's body once more. Many of the other cats joined her, Dustpaw and Smallear among them.

"Should we sit with them too?" Strikepaw suggested. She had to admit the idea didn't appeal to her much. It had been a busy day and she was beginning to feel tired. All she wanted to do was find somewhere warm and dry to curl up and sleep.

Greypaw shook his head. "No, only those who were closest to Redtail will share his final night. I'll show you where we sleep. The apprentices' den is over here."

Firepaw and Strikepaw followed Greypaw to a thick bush of ferns that lay behind a mossy tree stump.

"All the apprentices share their fresh-kill by this stump," Greypaw told them.

"How many apprentices are there?" Firepaw asked.

"Not as many as usual—just me, both of you, Ravenpaw, Dustpaw, and Sandpaw."

As Greypaw, Strikepaw and Firepaw settled themselves beside the tree stump, a young she-cat crawled out from beneath the ferns. Her coat was ginger, like Firepaw's, but much paler, with barely visible stripes of darker fur.

"So here come the new apprentices!" she meowed, narrowing her eyes.

"Hello," Firepaw mewed.

The young cat sniffed rudely. "They smell like kittypets! Don't tell me I'm going to have to share my nest with that revolting stench!"

Strikepaw felt rather taken aback. Since their fight with Longtail, all the cats had been quite friendly. Maybe they had just been distracted by Ravenpaw's news, he thought.

"You'll have to excuse Sandpaw," apologized Greypaw. "I think she

must have a furball stuck somewhere. She's not usually this bad-tempered."

"Psst!" spat Sandpaw crossly.

"Hold on, youngsters." The deep voice of Whitestorm sounded behind the apprentices. "Sandpaw! As my apprentice, I expected you to be a little more welcoming to these newcomers."

Sandpaw held up her head and looked defiant. "I'm sorry, Whitestorm," she purred, not sounding sorry at all. "I just didn't expect to be training with *kittypets*, that's all!"

"I'm sure you'll get used to it, Sandpaw," meowed Whitestorm calmly. "Now, it's getting late, and training starts early tomorrow. You four should get some sleep." He gave Sandpaw a stern look, and she nodded obediently. As he walked off, she spun around and vanished into the clump of ferns, sniffing once more as she brushed past Strikepaw.

With a flick of his tail, Greypaw invited Firepaw and Strikepaw to follow him, and led the way after Sandpaw. Inside the sleeping area, the ground was lined with soft moss, and the pale moonlight turned everything a delicate shade of green. The air was fragrant with fern scent, and warmer than outside.

"Where do we sleep?" Firepaw asked.

"Anywhere, just so long as it's not near me!" snarled Sandpaw, who was prodding some moss with her paw.

Greypaw, Strikepaw and Firepaw exchanged glances, but said nothing. Strikepaw raked together a pile of moss with her claws. When she had gathered her bed into a cozy nest, she circled until it was comfortable and settled down. Her whole body felt drowsy with contentment. This was her home now. She was a member ofThunderClan.

I AM DONE WITH CHPTER 2!!!! I typed this chapter in school, when I was supposed to, but I typed it in the Computer Lab, with a computer, so there mostly shouldn't be errors, but if

there are any errors, sorryyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!

Chapter 3

"Hey, Strikepaw, wake up!" Greypaw's meow broke into Strikepaw's dream. She had been chasing a squirrel, up and up, into the top most branches of a tall oak.

"Training begins at sunrise. Firepaw, Dustpaw and Sandpaw are already up," Greypaw added urgently.

Strikepaw stretched sleepily, then remembered: today was her first day of training. She leaped to her paws.Her drowsiness evaporated as excitement surged through her veins.

Greypaw was giving himself a hasty wash. Between licks, he meowed, "I've just spoken to Lionheart.Ravenpaw won't be training with us till his wound is better. He'll probably stay at Spottedleaf's den for another day or two. Dustpaw and Sandpaw are on hunting duty. So Lionheart thought you, Firepaw and I could train with him and Tigerclaw this morning. We'd better hurry, though," he added. "They'll be waiting!"

Greypaw led Firepaw and Strikepaw quickly through the gorse entrance of the camp and up the side of the rock-strewn valley. As they climbed over the crest of the ravine, a cool breeze ruffled their fur. Fat, white clouds raced across the blue sky overhead. Strikepaw felt fierce joy well up inside her as she followed Greypaw down a tree-shaded slope and into a sandy hollow.

Tigerclaw and Lionheart were indeed waiting, sitting a few tail-lengths apart on the sun-warmed sand.

"In future, I expect you both to be punctual," growled Tigerclaw.

"Don't be too severe, Tigerclaw; it was a busy night last night. I expect they were tired," meowed Lionheart gently. "You have not yet been assigned a mentor, Strikepaw, Firepaw," he went on. "For now, Tigerclaw and I will share your training."

Strikepaw nodded enthusiastically, her tail held high, unable to disguise her delight at having two such great warriors as her mentors.

"Come," meowed Tigerclaw impatiently. "Today we are going to show you the edges of our territory, so that you know where you will be hunting and what boundaries you need to protect. Greypaw, it won't do you any harm to remind yourself of the Clan's outer limits."

Without another word, Tigerclaw leaped up and bounded out of the sandy hollow. Lionheart nodded to Greypaw and they took off with equal speed. Firepaw and Strikepaw scrambled after them, their paws slipping on the soft sand.

The trees were thick in this part of the forest, birch and ash trees overshadowed by mighty oaks. The ground was carpeted with crisp dead leaves that rustled beneath their paws. Tigerclaw paused to spray his scent on a thick clump of ferns. The other cats stopped beside him.

"There is a Twoleg path here," murmured Lionheart. "Use your noses, Strikepaw and Firepaw. Can you two smell anything?"

Strikepaw sniffed. There was the faint scent of a Twoleg, and the stronger smell of a dog, familiar to her from her old home. "A Twoleg has walked his dog along here, but they are gone now," she mewed.

"Good," meowed Lionheart. "Firepaw, do you think it is safe to cross?"

"Yes," Firepaw replied after a moment.

Tigerclaw nodded, and the four cats stalked out from beneath the ferns and crossed the sharp stones of the narrow Twoleg path.

The trees beyond were pine. They grew tall and straight, row after row. It was easy to walk silently here. The ground was thick with layers of dead needles, which prickled against Strikepaw's pads but felt spongy underneath. There was no undergrowth here to hide in, and Strikepaw sensed tension in the other cats as they stalked unprotected between the tree trunks.

"Twolegs put these trees here," meowed Tigerclaw. "They cut them down with foul-smelling creatures, which spew enough fumes to make a kit go blind. Then they take the fallen trees to the Treecut place that lies near here."

Strikepaw stopped and listened for the roar of the tree-eater, which she had heard before.

"The Treecut place will be silent for a few moons more, until the time of greenleaf," explained Greypaw, noticing her pause.

The cats padded on through the pine forest.

"Twolegplace lies in that direction," meowed Tigerclaw, flicking his thick tail to one side. "No doubt you can smell it, Strikepaw and Firepaw. Today, however, we will head the other way."

Eventually they reached another Twoleg path that marked the far edge of the pine forest. They quickly crossed over into the safe bushes of the oak woods beyond. But Strikepaw still sensed anxiety in the other cats.

"We're approaching RiverClan territory," whispered Greypaw. "The Sunningrocks are over there." He pointed with his soft muzzle to a treeless mound of boulders. Strikepaw felt her fur stand on end.

This was where Redtail had been slain.

Lionheart stopped by a flat grey rock. "This is the boundary between ThunderClan and RiverClan territory. RiverClan rules the hunting grounds beside the great river," he meowed. "Breathe deeply, Firepaw and Strikepaw."

The pungent smell of unfamiliar cats hit the roof of Strikepaw's mouth. She was surprised how different it smelled from the warm

cat scents of the ThunderClan camp. And she was also surprised to realize just how familiar and comforting the ThunderClan scents seemed to her already.

"That is the smell of RiverClan," Tigerclaw growled beside him. "Remember it well. It will be strongest at the boundary, because their warriors will have scent-marked the trees along here." With these words, the dark tabby lifted his tail and sprayed his own mark on the flat rock.

"We'll follow this boundary line, as it leads straight to Fourtrees," Lionheart meowed.

He set off quickly, away from the Sunningrocks, followed by Tigerclaw. Greypaw, Strikepaw and Firepaw trotted after them.

"What is Fourtrees?" Firepaw panted.

"It is where the territories of all four Clans meet," replied Greypaw. "There are four great oaks there, as old as the Clans—"

"Be quiet!" ordered Tigerclaw. "Don't forget how close we are to enemy territory!"

The apprentices fell silent and Strikepaw concentrated on walking silently. They crossed a shallowstream, keeping their paws dry by leaping from boulder to boulder across the pebbly riverbed.

By the time they reached Fourtrees, Strikpaw was feeling completely out of breath and her paws ached. She wasn't used to traveling so far and so fast. She was quite relieved when Lionheart and Tigerclaw led them out of the thick woods and stopped at the brow of a bush-covered slope.

It was sunhigh now. The clouds had cleared, and the wind had dropped. Below, in the dazzling sunlight,stood four enormous oaks, their dark green crowns reaching almost to the top of the steep slope.

"As Greypaw told you," meowed Lionheart to Strikepaw and Firepaw, "this is Fourtrees, where the territories of all four Clans meet. WindClan governs the high ground ahead of us, where the

sun sets. You won't be able to catch their scent today—the wind is blowing toward them. But you'll learn it soon enough."

"And ShadowClan holds power over there, in the darkest part of the forest," added Greypaw, flicking his head sideways. "The elders say that the cold winds from the north blow over the ShadowClan cats and chill their hearts."

"So many Clans!" Firepaw exclaimed. *And so well organized*, Strikepaw added to herself, remembering Smudge's lurid tales of wildcats wreaking terror in the forest.

"You see now why prey is so precious," meowed Lionheart. "Why we must fight to protect what little we have."

"But that seems foolish! Why can't the Clans work together and share their hunting grounds, instead of fighting each other?" Strikepaw suggested boldly.

A shocked silence greeted his words.

Tigerclaw was the first to reply. "That is treacherous thinking, kittypet," he snapped.

"Don't be too fierce, Tigerclaw," warned Lionheart. "The ways of the Clans are new to this apprentice." He looked at Strikepaw. "You speak from your heart, young Strikepaw. This will make you a stronger warrior one day."

Tigerclaw growled. "Or it might make her give in to kittypet weakness right at the moment of attack."

Lionheart glanced briefly at Tigerclaw before he continued. "The four Clans do come together peacefully, in a Gathering each moon. Here"—he bent his head toward the four mighty oaks below—"is where they meet. The truce lasts for as long as the moon is at its fullest."

"Then there must be a meeting very soon?" Strikepaw suggested, remembering how bright the moonlight had been the night before.

"Indeed there is!" answered Lionheart, sounding impressed.

"Tonight, in fact. The Gatherings are very important because they allow the Clans to come together in peace for one night. But you must understand that longer alliances bring more trouble than they're worth."

"It is our Clan loyalty that makes us strong," Tigerclaw meowed in agreement. "If you weaken that loyalty, you weaken our chances of survival."

Strikepaw nodded. "I understand," she mewed.

"So do I" Firepaw chimed in.

"Come on," meowed Lionheart, standing up. "Let's keep moving."

They paced along the ridge of the valley where Fourtrees stood. Now they were heading away from the sun as it began to sink in the afternoon sky. They crossed the stream at a place where it was narrow enough to leap over in one jump.

Strikepaw sniffed the air. A new cat-scent touched her mouth glands, strong and sour.

"Which Clan is that?" Firepaw asked before she could.

"ShadowClan," answered Tigerclaw grimly. "We are traveling along their border. Keep your wits about you, Strikepaw and Firepaw. Fresher scents mean that a ShadowClan patrol is in the area."

As Strikepaw nodded, she heard a new noise. She stiffened, but the other cats kept up their pace, heading straight for the ominous rumbling.

"What's that?" she called, trotting to catch up with them.

"You'll see in a moment," replied Lionheart.

Strikepaw peered through the trees ahead. They seemed to be getting thinner, letting in a broad band of sunlight. "Are we at the edge of the woods?" Firepaw asked. Then Strikepaw stopped and took a deep breath. The green forest scents were overlaid with other strange, dark smells. This time it was not cat-scent, but an odour

that reminded her of her old Twoleg home. And the rumbling was getting louder, a ceaseless roar that made the ground tremble and ached in Strikepaw's ears.

"This is the Thunderpath," meowed Tigerclaw.

Strikepaw followed as Lionheart led them toward the edge of the forest.

Then he sat down and all four cats looked out. Stikepaw could see a grey path like a river, cutting its way through the forest. The hard grey stone stretched ahead of her so far that the trees on the other side seemed blurred and tiny. Strikepaw shuddered at the bitter smell that rose from the path.

Next moment she leaped back, her fur bristling, as a gigantic monster roared past. The branches of the trees on either side flapped madly in the wind that chased the speeding monster. Stikepaw stared around at the other cats, her eyes wide, unable to speak. She had seen paths like this before near her old Twoleg home, but never this wide, nor with monsters so swift and fierce.

"Scared me too the first time," remarked Greypaw. "But at least it helps to keep ShadowClan Warriors from crossing into our territory. The Thunderpath runs for many paw steps along our boundary line. And don't worry; those monsters never seem to leave the Thunderpath. You'll be fine as long as you don't go too near."

"It's time we returned to camp," meowed Lionheart. "You have seen all our boundaries now. But we'll avoid Snakerocks, even though the way around is longer. An untrained apprentice would be easy prey for an adder, and I expect both of you are getting tired, Firepaw and Strikepaw."

Strikepaw couldn't help feeling relieved at the thought of returning to the camp. Her head was spinning with all the new smells and sights, and Lionheart was right: she was tired, and hungry. She fell in behind Greypaw and Firepaw as the cats turned away from the Thunderpath and headed back into the forest.

The dewy scents of evening filled the air as Strikepaw made her

way through the gorse entrance into theThunderClan camp. Fresh-kill was waiting for them. Firepaw, Strikepaw and Greypaw took their share from the pile that lay in a shady part of the clearing and carried it to the tree stump outside their quarters.

Dustpaw and Sandpaw were already there, munching hungrily.

"Hi, there, kittypets," mewed Dustpaw, narrowing his eyes scornfully at Strikepaw and Firepaw. "Enjoy the food we caught for you."

"Who knows, you might even learn to catch your own one day!" sneered Sandpaw.

"Are you two still on hunting duty?" asked Greypaw innocently. "Never mind. We've been patrolling our territory borders. You'll be glad to know all is safe."

"I'm sure the other Clans were terrified when they smelled you three coming!" yowled Dustpaw.

"They didn't even dare show their faces," retorted Greypaw, unable to hide his anger.

"Well, we'll ask them tonight when we see them at the Clan Gathering," mewed Sandpaw.

"Are you going?" Strikepaw blurted out, impressed in spite of the apprentices' hostility.

"Of course," replied Dustpaw loftily. "It's a great honour, you know. But don't worry; we'll tell you all about it in the morning."

Greypaw ignored Dustpaw's gloating and started eating his fresh-kill. Strikepaw was hungry too, and crouched down to eat. She couldn't help feeling a twinge of envy that Dustpaw and Sandpaw were actually going to meet the other Clans tonight.

A loud call from Bluestar made Strikepaw look up. She watched several of the Clan warriors and elders gather in the clearing. It was time for the Clan party to leave for the Gathering. Dustpaw and Sandpaw leaped to their feet and trotted off to join the other cats.

"'Bye, you three," called Sandpaw over her shoulder. "Have a nice, quiet evening!"

The assembled cats stalked out of the camp entrance in single file, with Bluestar at the head. Her fur glowed like silver in the moonlight, and she looked calm and confident as she led her Clan to the brief truce between old enemies.

"Have you ever been to a Gathering?" Firepaw asked Greypaw wistfully.

"Not yet," replied Greypaw, crunching loudly on a mouse bone. "But it won't be long now; just you wait. All the apprentices get to go some time."

The three apprentices ate the rest of their meal in silence. When they had finished, Greypaw wandered over to Firepaw and Strikepaw began to groom their heads. Together they washed, sharing tongues as Strikepaw had seen the other cats do when she first arrived. Then, tired after the long trek, they pushed their way into their den. They settled down in their nests and quickly fell asleep.

The following morning, Greypaw, Strikepaw and Firepaw arrived early at the sandy hollow. They had crept out before Sandpaw and Dustpaw woke. Strikepaw had been eager to hear about the Gathering, but Greypaw had dragged her away. "You'll hear all about it later, if I know those two," he had mewed.

It promised to be another warm day. And this time Ravenpaw came to join them. Thanks to Spottedleaf, his wound was healing well.

Greypaw played around, scooping leaves into the air and leaping after them. Strikepaw and Firepaw watched, their tails twitching with amusement. Ravenpaw sat quietly at one side of the hollow, looking tense and unhappy.

"Cheer up, Ravenpaw!" called Greypaw. "I know you don't like training, but you're not usually this miserable!"

The scents of Lionheart and Tigerclaw warned the apprentices of

their approach, and Ravenpaw mewed hastily, "I suppose I'm just worried about my shoulder getting hurt again."

At that moment, Tigerclaw emerged from the bushes, closely followed by Lionheart.

"Warriors should suffer their pain silently," growled Tigerclaw. He looked Ravenpaw straight in the eye. "You need to learn to hold your tongue."

Ravenpaw flinched and dropped his eyes to the ground."Tigerclaw's a bit grumpy today," Greypaw whispered into Strikepaw and Firepaw's ears.

Lionheart glanced at his apprentice sternly and announced, "Today we are going to practice stalking. Now, there is a big difference between creeping up on a rabbit and creeping up on a mouse. Can any of you tell me why?"

Firepaw and Strikepaw had no idea, and Ravenpaw seemed to have taken Tigerclaw's comment to heart and was holding his tongue.

"Come on!" snorted Tigerclaw impatiently.

It was Greypaw who answered: "Because a rabbit will smell you before he sees you, but a mouse will feel your paw steps through the ground before he even smells you."

"Exactly, Greypaw! So what must you bear in mind when hunting mice?"

"Step lightly?" Strikepaw suggested. Lionheart looked approvingly at her. "Quite right, Strikepaw. You must take all your weight into your haunches, so that your paws make no impact on the forest floor. Let's try it!"

Firepaw and Strikepaw watched as Greypaw and Ravenpaw immediately dropped into a stalking crouch.

"Nicely done, Greypaw!" meowed Lionheart as the two apprentices began to move forward stealthily.

"Keep your rear down, Ravenpaw, you look like a duck!" spat Tigerclaw. "Now you try it, Strikepaw and Firepaw."

Strikepaw crouched down and began to creep across the forest floor. She felt herself fall instinctively into the right position, and as she stepped forward, as silently and lightly as she could, she felt a glow of pride that her muscles responded so smoothly.

"Well, it's obvious you've known nothing but softness!" growled Tigerclaw. "You stalk like a lumbering kittypet! Do you think dinner is going to come and lie down in your food dish and wait to be eaten?"

Strikepaw sat up quickly as Tigerclaw spoke, a little taken aback by his harsh words. She listened carefully to the warrior, determined to get everything right.

"Her pace and forward movement will come later, but her crouch is perfectly balanced," Lionheart pointed out mildly.

"Which is better than Ravenpaw, I suppose," complained Tigerclaw. He cast a scornful look at the black cat. "Even though you've trained for four sunrises, you're still putting all your weight on your left side."

Ravenpaw looked even more dejected, though Strikepaw mostly didn't care about that.

Then she heard Firepaw blurt out, "His injury's bothering him, that's all!"

Tigerclaw whipped his head around and glared at Firepaw. "Injuries are a fact of life. He should be able to adapt. Even you, Firepaw, have learned something this morning. If Ravenpaw picked up things as quickly as you, he'd be a credit to me instead of an embarrassment. Imagine being shown up by a kittypet!" he spat angrily at his apprentice.

Strikepaw saw Firepaw, who was unable to meet Ravenpaw's eyes, look down at his paws.

"Well, I'm more lopsided than a one-legged badger," mewed

Greypaw, breaking off from his careful stalking to stagger comically across the clearing. "I think I'll have to settle for hunting stupid mice. They won't stand a chance. I shall just wander up to them and sit on them till they surrender."

"Concentrate, young Graypaw. This is no time for your jokes!" meowed Lionheart sternly. "Perhaps you might focus your mind better if you try out your stalking for real."

All four apprentices looked up brightly.

"I want each one of you to try catching real prey," meowed Lionheart. "Ravenpaw, you look beside the Owltree. Greypaw, there might be something in that big bramble patch over there. And Strikepaw and Firepaw, follow the rabbit track over that rise; you'll find the dry bed of a winter stream. You may find something there."

The four apprentices bounded away, even Ravenpaw finding some extra energy for this challenge. With the blood pounding in her ears, Stikepaw crept slowly up over the rise. Sure enough, a streambed cut through the trees ahead of her. In leaf-fall, she guessed it would carry the rainwater away from the forest and into the great river that cut through RiverClan territory. Now it was dry.

" You go this way, and I'll go that way. After we catch prey, we'll meet up and then go back to the hollow." Strikepaw told Firepaw and they split up.

Strikepaw crept quietly down the bank and crouched on its sandy floor. Every sense felt on fire with tension. Silently she scanned the empty stream for signs of life. She watched for any tiny movement, her mouth open so she could pick up the smallest scent, her ears twisted forward.

Then she smelled mouse. She recognized the odour instantly, remembering her first taste the night before. Wild energy surged through her, but she remained motionless, trying desperately to pinpoint the prey.

She strained her ears forward until she picked up the rapid pulsing of a tiny mouse heart. Then a flash of brown caught her eye. The

creature was scrambling through the long grass that draped the edges of the stream. Stikepaw shifted closer, remembering to keep her weight on her haunches until she was within striking distance. Then she pushed back hard on her hind paws and sprang, kicking up sand as she rose.

The mouse raced away. But Strikepaw was quicker. She scooped it into the air with one paw, threw it onto the sandy streambed, and lunged on top of it. She killed it quickly with one sharp bite.

Strikepaw carefully lifted the warm body between her teeth and went to meet Firepaw who'd caught a rabbit.

Then they both returned with their tails held high to the hollow where Tigerclaw and Lionheart waited. She had made her first kill. She was a true ThunderClan apprentice now.

Hiiii! I'm sorry I haven't updated for so long, at first I didn't have ideas then I went for vacation overseas...

But anyways, at least I've published the third chapter of this story! I think I publish their ages after this chapter, which will of course be followed by Chapter 4.

Thank you for reading this far!! = D

Author's Note

[image]

In this story, Bluestar makes kits that are four moons old Apprentices, and yes, I know that's... young, but she *is* a bit crazy, right?

Here are their ages:

Sandpaw - 8 M oons old

Graypaw - 6 M oons old

Dustpaw - 4 M oons old

Ravenpaw - 4 M oons old

Strikepaw - 10 M oons old

Firepaw - 6 Moons old